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SUBJECT: BELGIAN LOCAL POLLS -- FAR RIGHT LOOKS POISED TO
MAKE GAINS, BUT NOT SCORE BREAKTHROUGH

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Belgium's October 8 local elections will prove one thing -- all politics might be local, but all local politics have national political implications. In Dutch-speaking Flanders, that means that the far right Vlaams Belang party looks poised to make important gains, but not to make the dramatic breakthrough needed to breach the cordon sanitaire blocking cooperation with other parties, particularly in the major cities. In the French-speaking Walloon region, the dominant Socialist Party seems set to hold on to the top spot despite numerous charges of corruption and cronyism. Whatever the result, the governing Liberal-Socialist coalition will tell the public that the local elections are just that and that it will continue working until the federal polls in the spring. End Summary.

Vlaams Belang Moving Forward, But not as Fast as it Wants

¶2. (SBU) Several messages have emerged from the avalanche of often contradictory polls released over the past few weeks. The first is that the Vlaams Belang (VB) has increased its support throughout Flanders, in the process solidifying its position as the second largest party in the region. Unfortunately for VB leader Filip De Winter, increased support does not look like it will translate into a majority or near majority outside of the Antwerp suburbs. The party has put most of its energy into scoring a breakthrough in Antwerp; polls suggest they will come close, but not gain an overall majority. Failure to achieve a majority would prove a big disappointment for the party's leaders, who are eager to show their ability to govern, and for many of its voters. They have grown tired of casting protest ballots for the last ten years, and may want to have someone representing their interests in a position actually to do something. VB may manage to muscle its way into government in a few small towns and rural areas where local politicians could prove willing to ignore orders from their leaders in Brussels if that is what it takes to hold on to their own seats.

¶3. (U) The other big message concerns the Flemish Christian Democrats led by Yves Leterme, the Minister-President of Flanders. Most polls indicate the party is going to recoup ground lost six years ago. This should translate into success in rural areas, but probably will not gain the party victory in any big cities. Despite local scandals, the Flemish Socialists should retain their control of the urban areas. Interestingly, the Christian Democrats probably will make a dent in the otherwise monolithic support that the Socialists enjoy in the Muslim and immigrant communities.

4.(U) The Flemish Liberals led by Prime Minister Verhofstadt

look like they will do poorly in the elections. In an attempt to prevent a complete rout, the Prime Minister has backed away from plans announced at the outset of the campaign not to get involved in the local races. Of late, he has even started campaigning for the current Liberal-Socialist ticket in Ghent, joining his Socialist cabinet colleague in a series of mildly salacious billboards touting the accomplishments of the city's red-blue administration since 2000.

Socialist Machine Clicking Smoothly in French Areas

¶5. (U) The Francophone Socialists (PS) will pay a price for a series of corruption charges against the party's old guard, but the most recent polls suggest only limited damage at the polls. In practice, this means the PS will have to form coalitions rather than rule without partners. French Liberal (MR) leader and Finance Minister Reynders has high hopes of becoming mayor of Liege, and the MR and French Christian Democrats may score an upset in Namur, where the governing socialists may lose out on power for the first time in years. Development Minister De Decker (MR) is leading in Uccle, a Brussels suburb. Defense Minister Flahaut seems to have the pole position in his native town of Nivelles. Justice Minister Onkelinx, also PS, faces a tough fight in the Brussels region commune of Schaarbeek, a heavily immigrant area, but a setback may not necessarily harm her federal career. The Front National, the far right group active in French-speaking areas, should gain numerous protest votes, notably in Charleroi, ground zero of the anti-corruption investigation. Lacking charismatic and effective leadership, the Front should be in no position to hinder the socialists.

Comment

¶6. (SBU) Because of the recent skirmishes inside the Liberal-Socialist federal cabinet, and the painstaking budget negotiations, the local elections of 2006 will reverberate more than previous local elections. Disappointing returns for the federal coalition parties would not immediately unnerve Verhofstadt's cabinet, a poor showing is certain to cast a pall over the Prime Minister's attempt to kickoff his own campaign to keep his job. Simply put, if he has a choice, Verhofstadt would rather do well in the polls, than have to explain why losing is unimportant. End comment.
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